

50X1-HUM

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Next 2 Page(s) In Document Denied





-3-  
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50X1-HUM

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SUBJECT

MILITARY THOUGHT (USSR): Some Reflections on the  
Initial Period of War  
50X1-HUM




-4-

50X1-HUM

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE INITIAL PERIOD OF WAR

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The altered conditions for waging armed conflict which have been brought about by the appearance of nuclear weapons lend new significance and new substance to the initial period of a war.

A historical look at this problem shows that the initial period of war became a special phenomenon in the second half of the nineteenth century. This was brought about by the conditions for mobilizing an army (converting it from peace to war footing) for concentration toward the border along rail lines, and for strategic deployment to the theater of military operations. 

As refinements were effected in the organizational structure of troops, in motorizing and mechanizing them, and in improving the system of mobilization and transport capabilities, as well as the development of air forces making it possible with air strikes to begin a war directly, the manner of conducting a war and the character of the initial period changed.

In the second half of the nineteenth century and in World War I there was a set period of time which elapsed between the moment of declaration of war and the deployment of main forces in the theater of military action and their entry into battle. (In the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871 this time period was twenty-one days; in World War I it was sixteen days.) This time period was limited to actions of forward, border units, and to the conduct of particularly significant preliminary operations. Historically this period even took on the name "initial;" it preceded entirely the main operations of the fully deployed army. This phenomenon has long since passed on into history. New conditions began more and more to constrict its limits in time and space. 50X1-HUM



50X1-HUM

-5-

Between the First and Second World Wars the view of the initial period changed sharply. First there appeared the theory of echelon entry into war--according to this theory, strong "covering armies" were maintained in the border zone even in peacetime, but mobilization and concentration of the main body of forces was still carried out after the beginning of war. In these conditions the initial period had to be comprised of the first operations of the forward armies, under cover of which all the fully mobilized forces were concentrated and committed to the main operations. Strategic deployment took on an echelon character. But this means of entering into war did not prove out either, and concepts of the initial period showed themselves to be outdated.

Prior to World War II the military press, especially the German-fascist press, began writing openly that modern warfare will begin all at once using all forces, said forces having been previously and secretly concentrated, and the main operations will develop fully from the departure position to the achievement of the established strategic goal. Under these conditions the initial operations are converted directly into the main operations, and all distinction between them in space and time disappears.

War is unleashed all at once as a sudden, stunning blow. Its initial period encompasses the entire opening campaign of the main operations. The side which began the war and holds the initiative conducts these operations on the basis of its initial strategic deployment to achieve the established strategic goal, and it continues all the way to a culminating or turning point, when the capabilities of the initial deployment have been exhausted and the resulting situation requires a change in the strategic plan, regrouping of forces, and concentration anew. This in fact is what happened in the Great Patriotic War. Then the initial period essentially lost all of the specific characteristics which had been attributed to it in previous conceptions

50X1-HUM



50X1-HUM

-6-

and which had comprised its basic content; every element of a beginning or preliminary character was shown to have been emasculated from it. Thus the basic difference came down to the fact that while previously the deployment of all main forces had taken place after the beginning of war, starting with World War II this was accomplished ahead of time, before the beginning of war.

Entry into war with all forces deployed ahead of time was shown to be superior to echelon entry, and demonstrated that if the beginning of war catches armed forces undeployed, it is no longer possible during the initial period to count on getting them fully mobilized and concentrated, and sending them into battle in an organized fashion. The initial period, to precede the main operations of all concentrated forces, was removed from the arena of war as a separate phenomenon.

In contemporary conditions the character of the initial period of war emerges as a function of the kind of war and how it will begin. With the appearance of nuclear/missile weapons of vast destructive force and effective global range, this question for the first time in history assumes a significance which is basic and decisive for determining the character of future war. This question hinges on whether nuclear weapons will be used, and how: right away, or after a certain time interval; with all their force, or only to a limited degree; on a strategic, or only on tactical and operational scales.

In this regard it will be more accurate to speak not about the character, but about the type of war, for every type can have a different character. Nuclear/missile weapons are capable of directly resolving strategic tasks, and therefore they make for a special type of war.

The type of war first of all determines the alternatives: what will be the main target of attention--the economic base,

50X1-HUM



-7-

50X1-HUM

50X1-HUM

the cities, the population, the whole rear area of a country? Or just the armed forces at the front? Also, what weapons will be used? These alternatives arose back before the appearance of nuclear/missile weapons as a product of the development of long-range bomber aircraft. Now the choice of these alternatives is predetermined by the very factor of nuclear/missile weapons. If nuclear/missile weapons are to be used (and of this, apparently, there should no longer be any doubt), then a war will inevitably become war against the entire rear area of a country. This follows from the nature of nuclear weapons, which are capable of at once rendering destruction to the entire rear area of a country.

However, the use of nuclear weapons at the outbreak of war is such a decisive act and is associated with such grave historical responsibility that all-out use of them in their full scope would apparently be resorted to only in the most extreme circumstances. The degree of employment of nuclear weapons therefore allows for a number of variants. In this regard at least three types of contemporary warfare are possible: local war without use of nuclear weapons; limited war with use of nuclear weapons on a tactical or not more than operational scale; and general nuclear war, with unlimited global employment of nuclear/missile weapons.

50X1-HUM

All-out nuclear war is, of course, the optimum variant. But leading up to this there are a number of intermediate stages which imperceptibly blend one into the other and form a whole series of escalating variants. First, local war can involve more and more countries, expand geographically, and turn into world war--which in turn can become nuclear. Second, limited war can grow into general nuclear war. In a situation where the theater of military operations is limited in depth and tactical or--more likely--operational, nuclear weapons are being used, it would shortly become very difficult to distinguish a limited war from a general nuclear war; at that point the latter could unexpectedly be at its inception. Third, a world war by no means

50X1-HUM



-8-

50X1-HUM

necessarily has to begin as all-out nuclear war; rather, it can through a series of stages approach the point where, depending on the course of events, nuclear weapons will be put into play in a subsequent period. The question is--at what stage will this happen?

The likelihood of one type of war turning into another shows that the character of a future war depends not only on the type of war, but also on the role which will be assigned to the different means of armed combat and different branches of the armed forces in a war. For the problem of the initial period this is of decisive significance. Especially important also is the place which ground forces are to have in the onset of a modern war.

There are at least three possible variants in the onset of a modern war. The first is when a general nuclear war begins with sudden, massive nuclear strikes using strategic means and simultaneous introduction of all other branches of service into the conflict. This is the most optimum of the variants. The second is when a war begins with nuclear strikes which are followed by the introduction of other branches of service. The third is when a war begins with conventional means of destruction and strategic nuclear weapons are brought into play only later.

It is quite evident that each of these typical cases, which can have differing variants, creates a variety of conditions for the onset of a war and determines the differing nature of its initial period. From this it is clear that it is impossible to speak of certain characteristics of the initial period of a modern war as being common to all cases.

It is evident that the first variant for the onset of a modern war is all-encompassing, the most threatening and dangerous variant. It is with the nature of this variant in mind that the initial period of war must be examined.

50X1-HUM



-9-

50X1-HUM

As was pointed out above, the experience of World War II has already shown that the initial period has lost its former distinctive features and has incorporated all initial operations of the main forces; also, the characteristic of being of a preliminary nature has vanished as one of its elements. Now under conditions of a nuclear war all the characteristics of the initial period face further evolution yet and shift from operational-strategic scale to the strategic-global scale.

This means that the problem of the initial period of war no longer has any sort of independent significance, expressible within defined limits and separate from modern warfare as a whole. In the sense that it is a process which runs a course in time and space, war has a beginning and an end and its phases, including an initial one. But this initial period now flows directly into the general course of the war and is absorbed by it. It is eliminated as an independent, specific phenomenon, separate and distinct from the general course of the war; it loses its independent boundaries in space and time.

Thus, under current conditions the initial period of a nuclear war becomes transformed directly into the commencement of the war in its full scale and optimum scope, and thereby loses the special qualitative content it previously had. It should be pointed out, however, that this is not to say that the beginning of a war will be like its end, that the phases of a war will not be different one from the other, or that the initial period--like any of the other periods--will not have its own aspects. The point is, the initial period is the actual beginning of a war in its full scope. There is no special period (osoby period) to count on to complete concentration and deployment of one's forces.

It goes without saying that in some cases a war can develop in such a way that there is still an initial period as an independent phenomenon, having its boundaries in space and time. This can happen in local wars, and even in some variants of a world war.

50X1-HUM



50X1-HUM

-10-

The task of scientific research has not been just to establish the line of historical development and show what has become of the initial period in present day conditions. This problem also has great practical significance, and serious practical conclusions must be drawn from it. Fundamental reexamination is required of a number of questions concerning the composition and training of armed forces during peacetime, and of techniques of their secret mobilization and strategic deployment during a period of threatening danger. This is necessary in order that at the moment of the possible beginning of war they may be fully armed and not subject to surprise.

Modern strategy faces tasks of enormous importance in this regard. These tasks call for studying what kind of war will break out, what will be the conditions of its onset, and how it will begin and be waged. These questions embrace all the concepts of the initial period of war in its current sense, and require research even during peacetime into a number of problems. For this it is essential to conduct scientific analysis of many social, political, economic, technical, and military questions. First and foremost, a strategy based on mobilization, concentration, and deployment of all forces in a theater of military operations at the beginning of a war should be rejected. A totally new concept of readiness of armed forces for war is necessary. The very concept of "mobilization" in its previous sense must be reexamined. It must be replaced by a concept of "readiness" in successively higher stages, a readiness which is organically provided for by the entire system of the composition of the armed forces in peacetime in accordance with the development and complexity of military-political circumstances.

The treatment of strategic questions is complicated by the fact that up to the last minute we will not be able to know definitely just what sort of war will develop and what forms it will take. Further, strategy cannot fully apply the experience of previous wars. Strategy accordingly bears a heavy responsibility.

50X1-HUM